

Interview with Richard Healey

Victor Cohen

Richard Healey was one of a handful of key leaders in the New American Movement (NAM). Though the son of a leader of the southern California Communist Party U.S.A., Healey never joined; instead, his early political activity was focused around the New Orleans and Los Angeles chapters of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). Radical factions dissolved that organization in 1969; thereafter, Healey was searching for a new political formation, read about NAM while a graduate student in mathematics at the University of California, Los Angeles, and was among the first to respond to Michael Lerner's call for forming a "new American movement." After graduating with his doctorate, Healey moved to the Bay Area in 1972, where he joined the Berkeley NAM chapter; from there he went on to Chicago in 1973, the city that from 1974 housed NAM's national offices. Once there, Healey was elected to a leadership position in the organization. In this role, he was central in guiding the organization's theoretical and strategic development, and was pivotal in beginning NAM's merger with the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC) to form the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). After the merger took place, he was a member of DSA's Executive Committee until 1984.

After leaving DSA, Healey served as Director of the Institute for Policy Studies, the Coalition for a New Foreign and Military Policy, and founded the Study Circle Resource Center, a network of educators, community activists and journalists committed to empowering democratic movements and strengthening civil society. Today, Healey is the Executive Director of the Grassroots Policy Project (GPP), a group he founded to help social justice organizations with their work at the community, state and national level. To gain a sense of the ways this organization builds on the work Healey undertook in NAM, log onto www.grassrootspolicy.org and explore GPP's set of workshops and readings under the headings "Strategy," "Power" and "Worldview." This interview took place on February 22 and 23, 2008, in Healey's home in Boston.

Victor Cohen: How did you first hear about the New American Movement (NAM)? Was it through a friend, or were you one of the people around the country who read Michael Lerner's pivotal essay that, in the wake of the collapse of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), called for a new socialist movement?

Richard Healey: It was the latter. I read Lerner's article, "Towards a New American Movement," in *Socialist Revolution* in 1969. I was a graduate student at UCLA. I had started in 1967 in mathematics and finished my PhD in '72. I joined SDS when I got there, but I was

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also part of an affinity group that was serious about reading and studying, and one of the things we read regularly was *Socialist Revolution*. In the summer of '69, there was the SDS convention where everything exploded. SDS's national leaders formed the Weathermen, the Revolutionary Youth Movement, and other strange groupings, which destroyed SDS. Our group at UCLA, like other groups around the country, was left looking for where to go and what to do next. I knew that I wanted to be a part of a democratic socialist organization. The Old Left had important insights and ideas, the New Left and the growing women's movement had contributed valuable ideas—I was interested in seeing if we could we take the best of these left traditions and push them forward. But it was inchoate in my mind. Then we read Michael Lerner's article and I felt "this is it." So I started a NAM chapter at UCLA.

Cohen: What about Lerner's call for a new movement really struck a chord?

Healey: First, it had a strong emphasis on democracy. I grew up in a family in the Communist Party (CP), and that made me uninterested in any group or vision of the future not committed to democracy. Secondly, it highlighted key aspects of the women's movement, and understood both democracy and feminism as fundamental to a transformative approach to socialism. Socialism was not a top-down change of power; it was not as market socialism claimed, simply a new way of doing accounting. It had to be much deeper than that, and I thought Michael had caught that. The other element that I liked was that he argued that it had to be an American socialism, rooted in the best of American traditions.

Cohen: So what did the NAM chapter you formed do?

Healey: Well, one of the first things we did was invite Michael Lerner to speak at UCLA. I had never met Michael, but had heard stories about his prickly personality. I picked him up at the airport, and I said, "Michael, don't take this personally, but can you not be a jerk at this meeting? We're enthusiastic, a lot of us have read your article, this is a big deal." And he was terrific. We did antiwar activities, we did whatever was going on in Los Angeles. I was particularly interested in getting off campus and working in the community. There were already a lot of people at UCLA who were trying to, as they called it, "Bridge the Gap" into the community. Primarily, though, we were a student group.

Cohen: But L.A. was not where you spent most of your time in NAM, correct? You eventually ended up working on NAM in Chicago?

Healey: Right, but first I went to Berkeley for a year to teach and join the Berkeley NAM chapter. There's a funny story about my attempt at joining that chapter that reflects something of the organization in its early days. I was told Nick Rabkin was the person in

Berkeley to talk to if you wanted to join NAM. So I called him, said I've been in the LA NAM chapter, I'm moving to Berkeley, and I'd like to join Berkeley NAM. There was a long pause, and he said, sounding puzzled, "What for?" [laughs]

I'm laughing now, but it points to an organizational problem NAM had early on. We didn't have training in recruiting, or in many of the basics of organizational life. In the CP, Nick's question would not have been conceivable. He and I later became friends and worked closely together, and we learned a lot about creating an organization. But in those early days, things were a bit different.

But his question was also the result of an issue Berkeley NAM was facing, one which other chapters were experiencing to some degree as well. They had been spending more time thinking and talking about what to do, than "doing." Though we didn't quite say it this way, many people in NAM felt, "We've got these great ideas, and we're very smart, so we've got to figure out exactly how to apply our analysis to the world, exactly which issues to take on, and exactly what program to do." The Berkeley chapter didn't want to work on just any issue, it wanted to connect its work with its vision of socialism. For many people that meant working on "nonreformist" reforms, a concept from Andre Gorz's book, *Strategy for Labor* (1967). To be fair, you have to acknowledge the underlying challenge NAM chapters were confronting: they were trying to figure out how daily struggles accumulate to something more than the sum of their parts. How does organizing, or working on specific issues, lead to socialism? Gorz's answer was nonreformist reforms.

That answer was very appealing, and I was excited when I first read the book in '67. But the question arises, "What is a nonreformist reform?" Then the debate starts: "You're nonreformist reform feels a little reform-y to me." I remember writing in that early period against the "perfect program syndrome," the situation where you can be trapped looking for a truly nonreformist reform. The Berkeley NAM chapter had been locked in a version of that, so I think Nick was stunned that anyone would want to join a group that only sat around and argued.

Cohen: It's interesting that this was a problem for NAM chapters. One of the central characteristics about the organization that many members fondly recall is its lively culture of debate, that there was room to work things out, and that people didn't have to adopt a viewpoint as a condition of belonging to the organization. It seems that this also worked against you though in the early days?

Healey: In the '70s, there were a lot of Marxist-Leninist groups — the October League, which became the CPML, Bob Avakian and the Revolutionary CP, the CLP, the CWP, the League of Revolutionary Workers, Marlene Dixon's League of Proletarian something-or-others. What was attractive about those groups was, first, like the CP before them, they had history on their side, or as my mother said, in their back pocket. They knew they were right, and they knew history would guarantee their success. Second, they were disciplined, so members knew they could count on each other. Third, a lot of

these groups put a huge emphasis, correctly in my estimation, on the question of racism in this country, and made major efforts to attract what we now call people of color—and succeeded much better than NAM did in attracting a cadre—real leaders—of people of color. NAM didn't offer those sure answers, we didn't offer that kind of discipline, and we were mostly highly educated white folks and a few people of color. We were always talking and questioning how to do our work, though if our work wasn't so effective, I don't think the Marxist-Leninist groups had much real work to show for themselves either.

However, those groups were much clearer about the relationship of organizational life to action. Because they were top-down, because they considered themselves democratic-centralist, they were never going to get stuck worrying about what was a nonreformist reform because somebody was going to tell them what to do next. They had the answers, and their leader was smarter than your leader. Well, people—right, left, and middle—have always been attracted to formulas like that, which NAM didn't have.

Cohen: Of course, NAM was hardly an unorganized reading club. Didn't part of Lerner's drive to form NAM come from his response to SDS's lack of a reliable structure and leadership?

Healey: Yes, that's right. We wanted to form a real organization, with defined membership and goals. That was crystal clear. But having said that, it wasn't clear what organizational forms were appropriate. In the early years, I don't think the majority of people in NAM would have thought of themselves as Marxist, or anything like it. We were people coming out of the movements of the '60s, looking for a place to do our work. And so we attracted a variety of people, particularly in the first couple of years, who drifted in, and often drifted out. We lost a lot of good people because it took us a long time to coalesce.

Cohen: How did you attract people, then?

Healey: Well, as my story about Nick Rabkin suggests, not easily [laughs]. You had to know somebody, or be reading *Socialist Revolution*, *The Guardian*, or *Radical America*, and see our name come up. It would have been very hard, otherwise.

Cohen: So at that point, around '72-'74, it was still very much a college-based (or college-educated) organization?

Healey: Yes, we grew out of the milieu of SDS and the women's movement. There was another organization, New University Conference, which had formed a little earlier, and a lot of their folks joined NAM. I didn't join NUC because I wasn't interested in a university organization. Even in SDS, I thought we should reach out to the community. I left Berkeley after a year and moved to Chicago in part because I wanted to be in an organization that could connect to working class communities and communities of color. But when I

moved to Chicago and helped create a NAM chapter there (there had been one there earlier which had fallen apart), at the first meeting, the people who attended were primarily from New University Conference. At the second meeting, we were introducing ourselves and one woman said, dispiritedly, "I'm quitting. I only have a masters degree. The rest of you all have your PhDs, and I just don't feel like I fit." I thought, "How have I gone wrong?" [laughs].

Cohen: But then, Chicago NAM became your main focus for many years. Why?

Healey: First, I felt that if I stayed in the Bay Area, I would never actually have to come to grips with the difficulties of socialism in the United States. The Bay Area had an otherworldly quality to it, and I wanted to see if we could make a dent in a big, working-class city. Secondly, I had already been thinking that our national office, which was in Minneapolis, should be moved to a place like Chicago. We needed a more central place, a more working-class place, a place with unions, with other groups.

Cohen: Wasn't Minneapolis a good place for that in many respects?

Healey: No, Chicago was a much better place for the Left to be. We needed a place that was a crossroads in the U.S., where there'd be cross-fertilization, where any time people were traveling, they'd drop in and see us. It had to have a much greater sense of vitality and centrality. I was also interested in ending the split between a paid staff in Minneapolis and an elected leadership. I thought we should have an elected, full-time leadership that also played a staff role. They could hire additional staff people, finances allowing. But full-time staff—I saw this in SDS—accumulate an enormous power and a vested interest in certain kinds of organizational logic. This same split, between staff and "leaders," plays out today in most community organizations and the national networks, such as Jobs with Justice. Full-time staff are not supposed to be leaders, but over the years they accumulate more real power than unpaid leaders, and this undermines democracy and makes it harder for political leadership to emerge. So seeing what had happened in SDS, I and several other people proposed that we create a political-administrative committee of three people who were elected, played a staff role, and ran the office. And we proposed that the office move to Chicago.

Cohen: Would you characterize yourself at that point as playing a leadership role in NAM?

Healey: At that point when the Political Administrative Committee formed, yes. Not before.

Cohen: What about NAM motivated you to the point where you wanted to be so deeply involved with how it grew?

Healey: Well, by '73, I no longer wanted to be an academic, and NAM seemed to be a place where you could generate a theory of democratic and feminist socialism and try to put it into practice. I grew up talking and thinking about these questions, and felt NAM was the place to make it happen. In Chicago, and in the NAM leadership, I also had met people I wanted to work with, like Roberta Lynch, Holly Graff, Nick Rabkin, and Mark Mericle.

Cohen: What about NAM made it seem to have that potential? The anecdotes you mentioned seem to paint a picture of a cloistered organization.

Healey: Cloistered sounds intentional. We were isolated, but people wanted to break out of that, to connect. We were self-critical, in the sense that we were prepared to think hard about our weaknesses, be honest about them, and try to figure out what to do. NAM was good about that. And those traits are not necessarily associated with intellectuals, or with the Left, both of whom can be happily cloistered or self-righteous and sectarian.

Cohen: How did NAM enable such a different kind of culture? It sounds almost accidental, rather than a programmatic decision on anyone's part.

Healey: Well, perhaps it was the ecological niches being formed in the '70s. You had many varieties of Trotskyism, Marxism and Maoism, and then you had NAM. I am only slightly flip when I say the humorless ones went off to be Marxists, Leninists, and Trotskyists [laughs]. We got left with the ones who couldn't stand the grimness of all that, people who were willing to grapple and experiment without having a received truth to guide us.

Cohen: That approach certainly proved effective. The NAM chapter in Chicago eventually became several chapters correct?

Healey: When I came, I reformed one, and then another one formed later. The chapter I got going in '74 often met in the communal house I lived in, on Blackstone Street in Hyde Park, with Holly Graff, David Moberg, Jo Patton, and other activists.

Cohen: Many NAM members I've spoken with often lived together in a communal house; wasn't it overwhelming, the 'round-the-clock NAM?

Healey: Not for me. I grew up in a house where all we talked about was politics. Here's a story about that: I was living with somebody in the early '70s, and talked regularly to my mother on the telephone.¹ I got off the phone after a long conversation with her one day, one of many that my partner had overheard by then. She turned to me and said, "Don't you ever talk about personal things?" I said, "What do you mean?" [laughs] "It was personal. We were talking the class struggle." [laughs] To me, that was the way you lived. I liked living like that. I still do.

Cohen: I think very few people in NAM had that experience at home. Most I've spoken to were radicalized in college, through the civil rights or antiwar or women's movements. Their perspective on NAM must have been very different than your own.

Healey: Yes and no. I think people were drawn to NAM because the project it set out for people became so overwhelmingly part of your life; there's an intensity and a purpose to it. When you're a full-timer or a committed activist, every activity becomes meaningful. Each act in your day speaks to something larger. That's very satisfying. Much of our lives are subordinated to bosses, teachers, outside forces in daily life—hegemonic forces, if you will. I think the absence of larger meanings is actually painful and creates hunger in people for something more, even if they are not aware of it.

The comradeship and meaning that NAM provided is the same as any group that provides a sense of a bigger picture and purpose. For my father, the most powerful, most significant thing in his life was World War II. He was caught up in something larger, in which everything he did was meaningful. Michael Lerner captured this in his book *The New Socialist Revolution: An Introduction to its Theory and Strategy* (1973), which was the best summing up of the politics of that period. His later book, *The Politics of Meaning: Restoring Hope and Possibility in an Age of Cynicism* (1996), was exactly on this topic, the hunger that people have for more meaning in their lives.

Cohen: How did NAM frame the question about the relation of its theory to its practice for its members, in a way that made it meaningful, then?

Healey: NAM struggled with two major problems. One was about how to work in mass struggles. Because we were a socialist group that didn't believe we were the vanguard that had all the answers, and that our job was to tell you, the masses, how to think and behave, we also didn't have access to a historical model for how to operate. This left us with lots of discussions and debates about how to do our work.

And this is another version of the issue I alluded to earlier—since the 1870s, socialist organizations have asked: "What's the relationship between daily reforms and revolution?" This is a problem I'm grappling with in my work today, just as NAM struggled with it 40 years ago. In fact, you can read much of the history of the Left as grappling with that question, and proposing Leninism and the vanguard party as one answer, Maoism as another answer, Trotsky's transitional reforms as yet another answer, and Gorz's nonreformist reforms as an answer. As far as I can see, none of these worked, and I don't think those kinds of answers can work.

The second problem NAM set out for itself was the practical aspect of the first one: how to recruit and build a stronger organization. This was intensified because NAM was facing a period of declining mass activity and declining movement consciousness. You could see the demonstrations tailing off, the demolition of the black movement,

by deaths, infiltration, and discouragement. The Left women's movement, and socialist-feminist thinking, was slowly declining in energy. The women's unions, which were such a dynamic force from '67 on, were being undermined by Marxist-Leninist groups, or just fading. Our sense in the late '60s and early '70s, was that "the revolution is on the agenda," that black people are moving, women are moving, the Chicano movement is growing. We thought that the white working class was going to get engaged in mass struggles. But by '74 or '75 I was beginning to wonder where the energy was, where the mass recruitment of activists for protests was taking place. You didn't see that wholesale engagement that marks a mass movement anymore. You recruited each person, one by one. And keeping them was harder.

Cohen: Why was that? I ask not only out of a historical curiosity about NAM, but also because its membership issues suggest the declining ability of socialist politics to motivate and galvanize people to the point where they'll commit to building a socialist movement. And this was long after the anticommunist crusades of the '50s.

Healey: Well, what we faced was the fact that mass movements have a life cycle; after a certain point, they decline. We didn't know that in the '60s; SDS didn't have any approach to maintaining an organizational form to counterbalance a decline in the movement. If we had known much more, and had more resources, we would have tried to capture the energy and the individuals and build organizations that would have the resources to last and grow. People like Nader did that, people who formed various forms of what I would call public interest liberalism.

But the movements that had inspired us, like the black movement in the early '70s, they were torn apart by assassinations and the limits of their own internal theories and approaches. Our experiences were not nearly as dramatic, but were of a kind with all the movements from the '60s. There were extraordinary, historic victories on civil rights, and then Dr. King said we have to move to economic rights. That challenge, about economic rights, was of the same dimension as NAM's. Now you're not talking about making sure the laws of the country are enforced fairly; now you're talking about challenging the whole thing. Now you're talking about capitalism. We were all bumping up against huge barriers, and we were stopped.

Cohen: Around '75, then, would you say NAM reevaluated its goals?

Healey: I wouldn't say goals as much as strategy. In NAM's first years, we had no strategy, or a dozen. If anything, we encouraged multiple strategies. The first attempt to give us a strategic approach that I remember was promoted by Jim Weinstein, Marty Sclar, and members of DeKalb [IL] NAM. Weinstein's approach, which he argued for in terms of his studies of American socialist history, was that you had to enter the electoral arena as explicit socialists. In the Dem-

ocratic Party you run in primaries as open socialists. You can see a contemporary version of that theory in [G. William] Domhoff's recent book on strategy, *Changing the Powers That Be: How the Left Can Stop Losing and Win* (2003). At that point, the majority of NAM membership was unconvinced by this approach of explicitly socialist politics, or ESP, as some of us called it. Certainly my attitude was that ESP just wasn't enough to win.

Cohen: From what I've read in the internal documents, as well as in NAM's *Discussion Bulletin*, the organization was very skeptical of electoral politics, especially their value for socialist groups.

Healey: You're right, but it might be more accurate to say we hadn't discussed the question of electoral politics in any depth. We were not persuaded by Jim and his group. However, our interest in electoral politics continued to grow over the following years. The question became less if we should be part of electoral politics, and more about how we should do them. I argued, as did my mother, for the classic Communist Party position, which was an inside-outside strategy. That is, you have to participate in electoral arena because it's a vital area of mass participation. But you build an independent base, and you build it in terms of critical support. So you never go into the Democratic Party apparatus, you never blindly support any candidate as the person who's going to change everything, even your own should you have one. You always ask, "What do we do the day after the election? Who do we do it with? How are they prepared?"

But in terms of activities, NAM simply wasn't connected to enough to carry out this approach. We weren't well-connected with unions, and outside of election-time, there wasn't much of a Democratic Party that we could have connected with. Nevertheless, we were asking different questions about electoral politics than some of the other Left groups. We were closer to the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC) in this respect, though we were becoming clearer about the importance of an independent base, which DSOC lacked. So as time went on, our thinking about electoral politics became part of the question of strategy.

In 1975, we were, more importantly, confronting problems with our own coherence and with the Marxist-Leninist groups. I had always dismissed them as irrelevant to the real world, but around that time we lost three of our strongest chapters—in North Carolina, Boston, and Minneapolis—to Marxist-Leninist formations. The Political Administrative Committee and its successor in 1975, the Political Committee, and leaders like Holly Graff, had to think about what they offered that we didn't. They had a body of theory, Marxist-Leninism, they had a methodology of how to work, and they had a disciplined organizational form.

From its earliest days, many serious intellectuals including well-known Marxists and socialist thinkers belonged to NAM. NAM chapters had study groups and local educational outreach programs, but there was little or no agreement, nation-wide, on how we should do our work. So in 1975, NAM needed to get clearer about strategy, for our own sake, and because we were competing with groups that had

very clear strategies, even if most of NAM didn't think much of them. NAM leadership realized that we ought to articulate, as strongly and clearly as we can, our theory of social change, our approach, our strategy, our organizational forms.

So at that point, we developed (and the membership approved) a strategy, plans, a basic Marxism curriculum, and we began internal schools and leadership training. We also created community schools in many cities with NAM chapters, which brought both NAM people and community people to discussions of theories of social change, of class and gender and race, and strategy. All of this came out of the 1975 Strategy Paper, and it was a big change for NAM.

Cohen: It doesn't sound as if the new strategy connected with electoral politics. Did that come about later, or at all?

Healey: Electoral politics was never the dominant approach, and it shouldn't be—it should flow out of a larger strategy. For me, strategy was about figuring out what Gramsci meant for America. I had been thinking about Gramsci since I read Gene Genovese's review of John Cammett's biography of Gramsci, which came out in *Studies on the Left* in '67. I thought that was a serious attempt to grapple with what it meant to fight for socialism in the United States, to grapple with the notion of a war of position and what it meant to fight for power in civil society. Gramsci's approach, to me, raised the questions which a group like NAM should be thinking about—the integration of culture and politics, of people's daily lives, of consciousness. That last one, how to deal with consciousness, might seem like an abstract question, but it is the critical one and we didn't know how to deal with it. Vanguardism was bankrupt; it was clear that linear theories of social change as adopted by community organizing groups that assume a succession of tactical victories almost automatically lead to something more, would go nowhere in terms of transformative change. It wasn't that Gramsci provided a blueprint, or all the answers, but he enabled us to ask the right questions.

Cohen: When I spoke with Holly Graff, she said that NAM members found Gramsci's analysis of civil society and hegemony to be very effective for their organizing, and that that she felt NAM organizers intuitively got Gramsci much quicker than any student she'd ever taught.

Healey: Absolutely. Holly and I worked together on the NAM leadership schools, and she and I certainly did our best to make these questions of consciousness, of hegemony, of ideology, central to the school. There're a lot of NAM people who are still active in politics and I think one of the reasons is because Gramsci made sense. Wherever you are, you can bring some of those insights to your work.

I was just looking at the 1975 convention report and the Strategy Paper we passed at that convention. At that point even NAM was still working in a world of a U.S. Left which was coming out of the hothouse world of campuses and the broader revolutionary move-

ments around the world. We thought of ourselves in the conceptual context of the revolutionary party, proletarianism, and dealt with the arcane questions that those terms raised. There's still remnants of that in the 1975 strategy document, but you can see how we're struggling to get out of that, how we're trying to think our way through to what it means to be operating in the American context. We use some of the old words—"revolutionary party", "armed struggle," but what we're talking about concretely are utility struggles, rent struggles, clerical workers, and power in civil society.

Cohen: Right. It's interesting today to note that you were thinking about what was known as the new unionism back then, or what today has become the terrain of some of the most powerful unions, like SEIU.

Healey: Yes, thanks in large measure to the women's movement, we were very interested in clerical workers and women workers, as union members. You see both old and new elements in the Strategy Paper. You have a formulaic framework of the revolutionary party and you have an attempt, starting in theoretical terms, to grapple with the much more modest possibilities and realities of American society in 1975. We don't talk about the upcoming presidential election, what the Ford presidency represented, or Jimmy Carter, who was going to be elected. We didn't get that far. But we're trying to grapple with what you actually do in applying Gramsci in different cities, if you will. In the strategy paper you see the attempt at greater organizational coherence as well—we're not only proposing regional schools and more political education based on our understanding of Marx and Gramsci, but also solidifying the support for full-time elected leadership as opposed to the split between staff and leadership.

You see these different currents. It's best to think of it not as currents, but the declining significance of one rhetorical framework and the attempt to grapple with a new theoretical framework, which I would say is based on a modest Gramscian reading of possibilities in advanced capitalist countries. In a sense, you can approach this document as an archeologist. What you see as you excavate is a deep layer of the old revolutionary framework—rhetorical, abstract—but above that are current questions: "How do you link real reforms to transformation? How do we have an impact? How do we get roots in our workplaces and communities?"

Cohen: It sounds as if NAM really underwent a profound shift at this time, in its approach as well as its organizational structure, and in so doing, came into its own.

Healey: The work we did on strategy and Gramsci was a turning point for NAM and in a certain sense a high water mark, at least for me. At that point, we were still in the optimism of the movements of the '60s, and part of the world struggle for socialism. Soon thereafter, though, I was coming to the conclusion that the gap between socialism and any kind of plausible struggle in the U.S. was too big

to be bridged by the path we were on. If there was a way to do it, we couldn't do it. We were not big enough, we didn't have the resources.

What NAM did successfully was get past the rhetorical formulas about social change to develop ways of thinking, of strategy, that were an advance, that did relate to the realities we faced then (and in fact that we face now). Our situation corresponded in some ways to what was happening internationally. Coming out of '68, youth groups were the self-proclaimed revolutionaries along with armed struggle groups, like the Red Brigades in Germany. At the same time, there were interesting theoretical formulations that reject vanguardism but attempt to maintain a revolutionary position, such as Serge Mallet's *The New Working Class* (1969), or Lelio Basso in Italy, who was one of the main thinkers and strategists in the left wing of the Italian Socialist Party. Then in '72, the British Communist Party came out with a new party program based on the idea of a broad democratic alliance. The British Left, including the Communist Party, started to think in terms of feminism, of transformation, and in particular about the implications of Gramsci for their own work. A similar process was then starting in the Australian Communist Party, a party with which NAM later developed some ties.

Of course, NAM was establishing its theory and practice just as parts of the left around the world are starting to grapple with this unexpected revival of capitalism. We didn't know it then, but '73 was a very pivotal year, and is often used today as a marker for the end of the postwar settlement between capital and labor. At that moment, capitalism seems to say, "No, that deal's off, making profits is getting harder. We're going on the offensive." And as we have seen, capital has been on the offensive against labor and working people since then.

Cohen: When you talk about that shift in '75, would the NAM schools, or another of its main programs, agitating for public ownership of the utilities, be an example of how NAM was grappling with that question of how to organize for socialism in daily life during an era in which socialism as a global movement seems to be receding?

Healey: Yes. It's good that you mention both, because from my perspective in 2008, that's still a good combination. The question then, and today, is "How do you get involved in real struggles, with real people, where there can be real victories and real lessons, and at the same time do political education and create new levels of leadership?" That's probably the most valid way I know of thinking about how to create more sophisticated, powerful organizations. At the same time, I continue to look around the world and ask myself, where can we learn from? What can we learn from places like Porto Alegre? We can see the need for struggles which institutionalize us, which give us more capacity to reach deeper into people's lives and which allow them to participate within the patterns of their own daily lives.

Cohen: Though NAM was oriented towards articulating an “American” movement towards socialist-feminism, did NAM look around the world for models in other left groups, or at least reach out to form alliances or organizational friendships?

Healey: [laughs] Yes, we did, but I have to laugh about the search for international friends. There was a competition among the Marxist-Leninist groups to see who could be anointed as the “real revolutionaries” by China or the Soviet Union. There was a group in the U.S. that had the Albanian franchise, if you can believe it. We had a joke in NAM: couldn’t we find some party to adopt us, some country we could look to for “guidance?” In the national office, we joked about adoration and endless pictures of their maximum leader in our monthly paper, in return for their supporting us, giving us money, giving us their revolutionary seal of approval. And we found a party in Italy’s PDUP [Party of Proletarian Unity, For Communism]² that we liked. PDUP was one of the many extraparliamentary groups in Italy at that time, and we thought it was one of the more sensible ones. One of their leaders toured NAM chapters in probably ’76, ’77. We were in love with him and I liked the idea of having some relationship to them, without the adoration or money of course. Unfortunately, they split soon after his tour, and we never even got them to give us a tour of Italy.

More seriously, certainly there were people like me who followed the Left debates around the world. It was a period in which parts of the Left were opening the doors, experimenting with new ideas and approaches. For me the most important development was Eurocommunism. And many of us in NAM continued to study new ideas coming from abroad, particularly the evolving concepts in Europe that related to the Gramscian tradition. I was especially interested in the work of Nikos Poulantzas, and even more influenced by Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, and Stuart Hall.

As I said earlier, the Australian Communist Party had been on a new path for some years. My mother had ties with them from her years as a leader in the American Communist Party, and the two of us went there in 1978 for the Australian Party’s national convention as NAM representatives. That was a party that had been deeply rooted in the working class. It had been split twice in the ’60s and ’70s by the Sino-Soviet fights, as many parties had been, so they had been weakened. But Brian Aarons, their general secretary, and the Party leadership were making an effort comparable to the best in the world, intellectually and practically, to renovate the party. They were feminists, they were all over aboriginal rights, they broke with the Soviet Union, they worked on internal party democracy, on new cultural norms, on opening new discussions. It’s still hard for me to think what more they could have done to create a new and healthy socialist party than what they did.

Both the British and Australian Communist Parties were, of course, several magnitudes more developed than NAM. They had a leadership cadre, full-time staff, huge resources compared with us, and deep roots in the working class. But NAM was comparable in that we were all trying to think about what it meant to be socialists and Marx-

ists in advanced capitalism, a capitalism much more adaptable than we'd believed. The working class was changing, and the question of working-class consciousness was even tougher than we'd thought.

It's useful to put our NAM struggles in the context of those other parties. I think NAM and the Australian and British Communist Parties were on the right track, and what we were thinking in terms of a Marxism developed by Gramsci and others still makes sense. But our new ideas and approaches were not enough for the groups I cared about the most to survive.

Cohen: Does that comment reflect on the trajectory NAM was on by the early '80s, and its eventual merger with DSOC?

Healey: NAM merged with DSOC to form DSA in '82. The British Communist Party collapses soon after 1989, as does the Australian Communist Party. The Italian extraparliamentary Left more or less disappears at the same time. This "sector" of the Left, internationally as well as in the U.S. here, didn't have the capacity to continue down this new path. But I think we were essentially on the right track.

This could lead to a bigger discussion than we have time for, about the implications to what we learned in NAM for the current period. Take one example: Gramsci (and Laclau and Stuart Hall) tell us a lot about the importance of ideology, and that the Left needs to generate an alternative to it that functions in all parts of our work, that functions in people's daily lives. At one level, to put it very simply, this is about asking, "What are we for?" Most progressive groups only answer this in the most immediate way, in a way that is easily incorporated into the dominant ideology. .

I attended a three-day meeting of thirty progressive think tanks in December [2008]. The question posed to us was "Is there a progressive idea sector, and can we make it real?" One of the items on the agenda was about the incoming Obama administration and the transition. The reference point was Heritage Foundation's briefing book for the new president, so the question became, how do we at this meeting produce our own transition book for the incoming administration? The problem with that, from the point of view of our lessons from NAM, is that this question is about what we can make happen in 2009, and about how to foster incremental changes without challenging the larger ideological framework. No one is working on the "briefing book" for 2019 that incorporates within it an alternative ideological framework, and that suggests how progressives start working now to make it a credible alternative by then.

Cohen: People felt that there was already too much work?

Healey: Well, not only that, but certainly, that was a part of their response. We need a division of labor, some groups working on current, incremental issues, linked to others that can go further. One type of group can't do it all. Go back to NAM. Our organizational model in NAM was if anything, the revolutionary party—an organization that tries to be an all-encompassing entity that in itself combines theory and action, short-term and long-term, in all dimensions

of daily life. That's probably not a good model under advanced capitalism. We need a more complicated infrastructure, a network of groups with a division of labor among them. Now what we have is a gap between our short-term agendas and our long-term needs, with nothing trying to fill it.

Cohen: This gap that you're talking about, it didn't feel as evident in the seventies?

Healey: Not inside the Left. Yes, we were aware of it, but at that point, we felt like history was surging on our side, that the contradictions were erupting, that they were going to continue, get more sharp, and that the gap would narrow. I think by '75, our discussions and documents in NAM point to the fact that, actually, history was not moving on our side. We didn't quite know it as clearly as I'm saying it to you, but that's why a few years later, we were opening up discussions of merging with DSOC, an organization we would never have considered even working with a five years previously.

Cohen: What was the first formal person-to person NAM-DSOC meeting?

Healey: NAM and DSOC people moved in overlapping worlds, so there were probably many points of contact—all informal. In terms of the merger, as I remember it, I called Jack Clark, general secretary of DSOC, up on a gloomy January day and said, "Jack, this is going to be a shock. I think we should talk about merger." The Left was small so I had met Jack, though I didn't know him well. He was friendly, if not especially enthusiastic about any big steps, but he invited me to come to their upcoming national convention. I gave a presentation there, and I'm sure I didn't say a word about merger.

Cohen: What would you have presented to DSOC?

Healey: I couldn't tell you that I have any memory other than the thought, "Oh, I'm walking into the lions' den." [laughs] "These are old, hardened anticommunist infighters, and no matter what I say, they're going to be suspicious that I'm a stalking horse for my mother." My mother, and Benny [Dobbs] and Saul Wellman had joined [NAM]. They were ex-communists, but they hadn't recanted, and for the DCOC folks, if you haven't recanted, then you're not a real ex-communist. We didn't have "recanters" in NAM, we had ex-communists, like my mother and Ben and Saul and several others. As they said, they were still "communists with a lower case c," and they were proud of their history in the Party, whatever their acknowledgement of the party's mistakes, and they were not about to recant anything and join the "professional anticommunists." So DSOC was suspicious. It was a stretch for them, and a stretch for Michael Harrington, to be gracious and welcoming—but they were.

Cohen: Before we started recording, we were talking casually about the merger and you were saying that your mom was not in favor?

Healey: No. Dorothy opposed the merger. I had come to the conclusion that it was too small a world, and if you took one step away from our two organizations, no normal person could tell the difference. Inside NAM we felt there were important differences around race, around the Democratic Party, around Israel, around feminism, but if you weren't an insider on those questions, you wouldn't understand what we were talking about. Both organizations suffered from lack of resources, a lack of secondary leadership, and many other things. I also felt that we should set an example, that we could have differences inside the [merged] organization. My mother's attitude was that DSOC wasn't much of an organization, that it didn't have much internal life at all. One of her more annoying arguments against the merger was that neither organization was very big, and that "zero plus zero is still zero." But the question of the Democratic Party, for example, I think she took more seriously.

Cohen: You mean the question of working with the Democratic Party?

Healey: She saw it in the pejorative sense, that DSOC was "tailing the Democratic Party"—meaning you don't get ahead of your friends in the unions or the Democratic Party, you "tail" behind them. And there was a passive quality in DSOC—Harrington and the leadership didn't want to get out ahead, didn't want to challenge too much, didn't want to take on too much. In any case, Dorothy opposed the merger. At the 1979 NAM convention when the idea of merger came up for the membership's approval of moving forward, I argued for it, and she was one the main speakers opposing the merger. She ended her speech with a wonderful line, "And I didn't quit the Third International just to join the Second." Vast applause. How could you not applaud that? Even I liked it, though I was afraid she had just killed the merger.

Cohen: So how did the merger play out? I know it became very heated within NAM, and that about a third of the members left rather than participate in the new organization. But for those who remained, what was the feeling going into the formation of a new political organization?

Healey: The merger actually happened in 1982. The NAM side went into it feeling we were going to have a real merger—we were not entering another organization to take it over, we were not going to have some separate caucus, or reserve something for ourselves. I think, by and large, DSOC had the same attitude.

I joined the DSA Executive Committee after the merger. I didn't stay on it long. The breaking point for me in terms of enthusiasm was around the issue of U.S. intervention in Central America. I was working deeply on it in those years, primarily with churches. I came into the Executive Committee and said that we should really put resources and people into the anti-intervention struggle, that it was an important struggle in terms of the U.S.'s role in the world, that it was a place of vitality, of energy, of people in motion. And Michael [Har-

rington], if I remember correctly—said, “No. We want to be with the working class. That’s why we work with unions, not churches.” I said, “Michael, the churches are the working class. Where do you think the working-class people actually participate?” I lost that fight.

It seemed, at that moment, my mother was right, that they were really about tailing the Democratic Party and the unions—and they weren’t interested in fighting against intervention in Central America. I felt that this was the most important thing going on, in terms of real live human beings being involved in real struggles, and if we didn’t get involved in that, then what was the point of DSA?

Cohen: One of the things about NAM that strikes me, and the merger is an interesting example to think about in this context, is that NAM’s approach to building a movement, and even merging with DSOC, harkens back to a kind of popular front vision for creating a socialist movement. Much more so than any other group that on the left, NAM seems to have been serious about working with others to make it happen.

Healey: The phrase that I have often thought of would have been the “united front from above and below.” I like that idea, that a coalition—the united front from above—is never enough, you have to get the base of each organization involved and work at the base across all of them. That certainly was what we were thinking about. DSOC could have helped, if they had been interested in trying to craft that.

Cohen: To press on the question of the merger, then, it seems like NAM going into it knew exactly what DSOC was like, and how they operated. With that in mind, where did you see this united front program coming from?

Healey: Well, I can speak only for myself. I was not convinced there would be such a thing. The merger was, for me, a holding action. I didn’t think we [NAM] were going to survive much longer. We weren’t getting involved enough in real struggles, we couldn’t find people who wanted to be full-timers, and we couldn’t find enough national leaders. That last problem was, for me, a key indicator that NAM was in trouble. Another indicator for me came about during a training in 1977 we held in our Chicago office for what I thought to be our best leaders. At one point in the training, I said, “Hold up your hand if you have talked to a friend, a lover, a coworker, or somebody, about socialism.” Nobody raised their hand. Nobody had talked to anyone outside the organization about socialism. If we couldn’t do that, then in what sense were we going to be able to bridge this gap between daily reforms and socialism as a transformative system? We didn’t have a way of doing it. It wasn’t the fault of the people in NAM; this was a period in which carrying out any leftist strategy was going to be very hard, and much harder for a small organization with few resources besides good people.

Cohen: With that said, didn’t the Santa Cruz NAM chapter do a pretty good job of becoming a ruling bloc on the city council, and

get Mike Rotkin, a lead NAM organizer, elected mayor? The Portland NAM chapter had a pretty impressive political trajectory as well after the merger.

Healey: Mike Rotkin was mayor in Santa Cruz, and Beverly Stein was a stunning leader in Portland, and later a state rep (and open socialist). She was one of the best we had in all of NAM. But NAM didn't have a ruling bloc in Santa Cruz, rather Santa Cruz had a mayor who also happened to be a member of NAM. We did have unusual leaders who put in unusual amounts of time. We had chapters within large counter-cultural groupings. But that didn't feel like enough. To tell the truth, I regret the merger now. I was just talking about this with Holly Graff, and I think we are as close politically now as we were then. We both feel like we made a mistake, that it would have been better to have limped along and tried to maintain the organization, with our emphasis on leadership and internal education, or perhaps tried to find a way of connecting with the Midwest Academy and Citizen Action and done educational work there. Or at least kept a NAM caucus or network together inside DSA to do political education.

Cohen: In 1978, when you were at the Democratic Agenda, the DSOC-organized conference that drew both Democratic politicians and socialists together, you had a different take on DSOC then?

Healey: A little bit. DSOC created that Democratic Agenda conference, and it was a political space that nobody else could have formed. It was exciting, it was inside and outside the Democratic Party. It allowed you a place to debate, to meet, to think about big ideas. The only thing remotely comparable to it was Lee Webb's organization, which was started a year before, the Conference on State and Local Alternative Public Policy, and their conferences for years were fabulous because they created a similar space for debates about ideas and practice. That is, the space we felt the left needed didn't have to be in the Democratic Party, but it had to have one foot solidly rooted in mainstream politics so those people would come. And then other people could engage them. So, for doing that, DSOC was very valuable.

You know, if you want to rerun history, when Harrington pulled out of the Socialist Party in '72, if at that point we could have come together, when there was still enough vitality, enough young people in motion, who knows what could have developed. But it gets very tricky, imagining what might have been. For example: Michael Lerner came to California NAM, it must have been '72, with the notion that property taxes were driving people crazy and we should take a Left position on that, we should work on property taxes. NAM members were puzzled, perplexed. "Why would we want to work on taxes? How do you work on taxes? What did it have to do with the class struggle?" In retrospect, it was a brilliant proposal and pre-saged the Howard Jarvis tax revolt. But we were not rooted enough in existing arenas of work to have any idea about how to work on such a thing. However, I can imagine in my counterhistory a 1972 NAM-DSOC being able to respond.

But you can't rewrite history. In '72 we couldn't have merged with DSOC. Our organizations were too inchoate, the '60s were too close—Harrington had been on the wrong side of the war, which mattered to us. His anticommunist past was a little too close. You evolve only when you can, and we missed a certain modest opportunity to have built a better American Socialist Party.

Notes

¹ Richard's mother was Dorothy Healey, well-known and long-time leader of the Communist Party U.S.A. in Los Angeles. She later joined NAM, along with several other CPUSA members of her generational cohort. -Ed.

² The PDUP was a short-lived Italian political party formed in the mid-1970s by the fusion of the Manifesto group, which had been expelled from the Italian Communist Party (PCI) in 1969 for its left criticisms of the PCI, and a section of the Italian Socialist Party for Proletarian Unity (PSIUP), which had left the Italian Socialist Party in the early 1960s. In 1975, the PDUP received 1.2 percent of the national vote, and could claim up to 20,000 members.

